Lee Hamilton

AN ESTEEMED HOOSIER COMES HOME

LOOKING BACK ON A LIFETIME OF SERVICE TO INDIANA AND AMERICA

by Elisabeth Andrews | photography by Steve Raymer

Lee Hamilton at home in Bloomington with his wife Nancy and their dog Bertha.

(l-r) Lee Hamilton, Gerald Ford, Nancy Hamilton, Jimmy Carter, and George H.W. Bush at the White House. *Photo courtesy of Modern Political Papers, IU Libraries*

IF YOU COULD THUMB THROUGH THE *pages of history* GOING BACK OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY, AT ALMOST EVERY TURN YOU'D FIND *Lee Hamilton* near the center of the action.

Like Woody Allen's character in *Zelig*, he seems to crop up in every frame—hosting John F. Kennedy on a visit to Indiana during his presidential campaign; introducing one of the first proposals to cut funding for the Vietnam War; questioning Oliver North in the Iran-Contra hearings; leading the congressional terrorism investigation as vice chair of the 9/11 Commission; developing the Iraq Study Group's strategy to promote stability in the Middle East.

Hamilton, who turns 80 this year, has advised presidents from Lyndon Johnson to Barack Obama, counted among his friends Anwar Sadat, Kofi Annan, and Mikhail Gorbachev, and bantered at length with the Queen Mum. Few statesmen have been more ubiquitous or more influential. And yet, despite these far-reaching activities, the statesman who grew up in Evansville has always seen himself as an Indiana resident.

"It's kind of funny," he says. "We were in Washington for 46 years. Our children grew up there. But I always felt I was a Hoosier. I always considered Indiana my home."

Now, after 34 years representing Indiana's 9th District in the U.S. Congress and another 12 in a range of high-profile appointments, Hamilton has settled in Bloomington. It was an easy choice, he says—he has two daughters and five grandchildren in the area, and has directed the Center on Congress at Indiana University's School of Public and Environmental Affairs since 1999. He also attended law school here, and represented Bloomington for many of his years in Congress (though not all, due to redistricting). Moreover, "It's a very welcoming community," he says. "It has a lot of the advantages of a big city without being a big city."

Though Hamilton has yet to trim down his list of activities that take him frequently back to Washington, he did find time to talk with *Bloom* about what he's seen and heard as what he calls "a bit player in a large drama."

AN INDIANA BOY

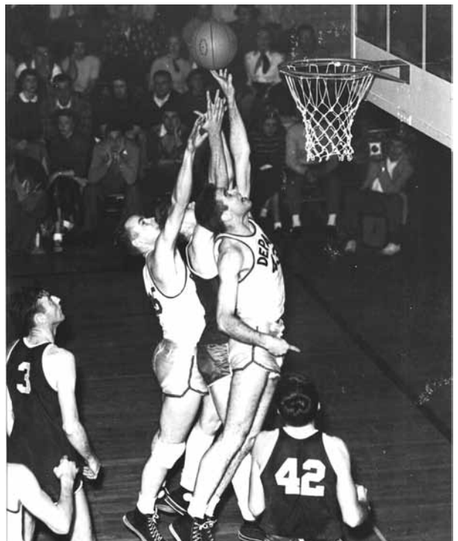
The world knows Lee Hamilton as an eminent elder statesman, but before he ever appeared on a ballot, he had already made a name for himself in Indiana. In addition to his diplomatic skills in the legislative chamber, it turns out the 6'4" Hamilton had a real knack for negotiating a basketball court.

"Like a lot of Indiana boys, I grew up with my principal attention on basketball," he says. "This was right after World War II, before the NBA had started and even the Big Ten was not as dominant as it is today. Much of the basketball hysteria was focused on the high school game."

Hamilton played for Evansville Central High School, making All-State his senior year and helping his team into the finals. He went on to play for DePauw University, starting all four years, and even to help Goethe University win a national title while studying abroad in Germany. In 1982, he was inducted into the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame. His fellow inductees that year were Oscar Robertson and Bobby Knight.

If professional basketball had developed a little quicker, Hamilton's career may have had a very different trajectory. "I think I had the opportunity to play pro ball, but I would have been sitting on the bench most of the time," he explains. "Today, if you're sitting on the bench, it's worth your time, but back then I would have drawn just a few thousand dollars. So instead I decided to go to law school."

Hamilton, above the rim, in his basketball days at DePauw. *Photo courtesy of Modern Political Papers, IU Libraries*



HOSTING JOHN F. KENNEDY

Hamilton graduated from the Indiana University School of Law in 1956 and practiced first in Chicago and then Columbus, Indiana. After a few years, however, he found himself "fundamentally bored." He had an interest in politics—one of the more exciting moments during his time in Columbus came in 1960 when he hosted presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy on a visit to the city. The event was a fiasco: Hamilton managed to attract only 35 people to the reception ("The most charismatic president of recent years," he muses, "and even my wife didn't come") and Kennedy was unable to speak due to laryngitis. Instead, the candidate handed out cards with the message, "I'm running for president and I'd appreciate your vote." Hamilton recalls that Kennedy's advisor and speechwriter Ted Sorensen later commented, "That was the single worst event of the entire campaign."

Even so, Hamilton was able to see what he was missing in his life of legal briefs and county courthouse filings. He ran for Congress in 1964 in an attempt to ease what he describes as an inherent "restlessness." Fortunately, the political zeitgeist was on his side.

"There's a lot of luck in politics and I was just extremely lucky to run in the right year," he says. Hamilton was one of the 295 Democrats elected to the House of Representatives that election, giving the party a two-thirds majority. "I've often said that any fool on the Democratic ticket could have been elected in 1964," he says, "and several were." (It was also the last year a Democratic presidential candidate carried Indiana until Barack Obama's election in 2008.)

Hamilton was appointed to the Foreign Affairs Committee, an assignment he first lamented but later came to love. "It was not my first choice when I went into the Congress—I had hoped for Public Works, because I thought I could do more for my district," he says. Over time, however, he became so devoted to foreign affairs that he turned down a coveted appointment to the influential Ways and Means Committee.

"When I told [Speaker of the House] Carl Albert 'no,' he said to me, 'Lee, you must be the dumbest man in Congress,'" he laughs. "Almost every member of Congress will tell you I made a mistake. But I never looked at it that way. I enjoyed what I was doing." He would go on to chair the Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as the Joint Economic Committee and the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

THE VIETNAM WAR

When Hamilton entered Congress in 1965, much of the Foreign Affairs Committee's attention was trained on Vietnam. Initially, Hamilton supported the war, but the more he learned about it, the more dubious he became.

He recalls one moment in particular when he began to see the war in a disturbing light. "One of the things that turned me against the war was an occasion when I visited Vietnam," he says. "We stayed in a hotel in Saigon, then early in the morning we flew by helicopter with the generals out into the field. I went with a patrol out into the jungle.

"During that patrol, they heard some noise in the jungle, and so they sprayed that area of the jungle with machine guns for what seemed like a long time but was probably a minute or two. Then we returned to the camp and the captain was writing his report. He wrote down, 'KIA: 10.'

"I said to him, 'Captain, where did you get that figure?' His response was, 'We fired so many bullets in there we must have killed at least ten.' I said, 'Did you ever see any bodies?' He said, 'No.' I then began to understand that a lot of the statistics we were getting were manufactured. So when [Defense Secretary] Bob McNamara came into the House of Representatives to testify and he would just spout statistics for an hour, I began to have a lot of skepticism about it."

Between Hamilton's growing convictions and his status as a congressional newcomer, he became the Democratic leadership's designee to submit one of the first amendments limiting the U.S. commitment in Vietnam. "I was young and dumb and they could sacrifice me," he explains. Unexpectedly, however, the proposal got a considerable amount of support. "We didn't win, but we got more votes than anybody thought we would. And that was really the beginning—in the House, at least—of the turn against Vietnam."

'ANY *fool* ON THE DEMOCRATIC TICKET COULD HAVE BEEN ELECTED IN 1964, AND *several* WERE.'

Hamilton with President Lyndon Johnson during Hamilton's first congressional term. *Photo courtesy of Modern Political Papers, IU Libraries*

The fallout from that proposal also caused Hamilton to experience, for the first time, the pain of sacrificing personal relationships for political convictions. President Lyndon Johnson had been kind to Hamilton since his arrival, even traveling to the 9th District to support Hamilton's campaign for reelection. The proposal to cut funding, it seems, came as a shock to Johnson. "That evening I went to the White House for a social event of some kind," Hamilton says. "I remember to this day Johnson coming up to me. He crossed the East Room, came right over to me and said, 'Lee, how could you possibly do this to me?' Here was a man who had helped me a lot, and I had gone against him."

'I REMEMBER TO THIS DAY [PRESIDENT] *Johnson* COMING UP TO ME. HE CROSSED THE EAST ROOM, CAME RIGHT OVER TO ME AND SAID, *"Lee, how could you possibly do this to me?"*'

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Other times, however, Hamilton encountered a pleasant reversal of that dynamic, in which he came face-to-face with someone whose cause he had taken up in the House. Such was the case when ran into Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the private terminal of Washington's national airport.

"Those were the days before there were too many private planes, so we were waiting together and had quite a long chat," Hamilton recalls. "I was interested in his background as a preacher, and I asked him where he picked up his homiletic skills. I think his answer was something to the effect that the church has always been a part of his life, all his life. He had spent his youth listening to African-American preachers. He absorbed a lot of it by osmosis, he said."

Hamilton was a great admirer of King and a champion of civil rights in the legislature. He voted in favor of all the civil rights bills that came through Congress during his tenure, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Civil Rights Act of 1968 prohibiting housing discrimination, and the Equal Rights Amendment that failed to become ratified but would have guaranteed women equal protection under the law. Thinking back on those efforts, what strikes him most profoundly is the vehement opposition they met with in Congress.

"Today, everybody supports Martin Luther King, but back then it was not like that at all. He opposed the war, and his economic views were very critical of the capitalist system. We had some very strong members of the Congress who were very anti-civil rights. They had connections to [FBI Director] J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI who were tracking Dr. King carefully. I didn't know that at the time, I learned it later. In their minds, King was a threat to the country because he was stirring up radicalism," he says.

The Equal Rights Amendment inspired similar feelings among its detractors. "You had very intense opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment. It's pretty hard to understand why people would be against it, but the opposition managed to defeat it. They felt that it would disrupt the family. They fundamentally didn't agree with equal rights for women, I think that's what it came down to," Hamilton says.

Members of Congress had many ways of making their feelings known, both inside and outside the chamber. When the Watergate scandal broke, in which President Richard Nixon was implicated in a break-in to the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee, congresspeople expressed their disapproval by socially snubbing the president, Hamilton recalls.

"Members of Congress were invited to a reception in the White House hosted by President Nixon and [First Lady] Pat Nixon. My wife Nancy and I went down, and nobody was there," he says. "It was an amazing experience, because usually when the president invites you to something, it's a command performance. But Pat and Richard Nixon just stood there and Nancy talked with Pat and I talked to the president. We stood there talking for twenty minutes before anybody came.

"I don't remember why I was there, to be frank," he adds. "I probably thought, 'This is a presidential invitation—I ought to go, out of respect for the office.'"

THE IRAN-CONTRA AFFAIR

Although Hamilton wasn't directly involved in the Watergate investigation, he later found himself playing a central role in the investigation of a presidential scandal as co-chairman of the Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran. The Iran-Contra Affair concerned the secret sale of arms to Iran in defiance of an embargo, the proceeds of which were used to fund Nicaraguan rebels despite a legislative amendment specifically prohibiting such support. Hamilton's decision not to impeach President Ronald Reagan was arguably the most controversial call of his career.

"The liberals criticized [co-chairman] Danny [Inouye] and me very strongly because we didn't recommend impeachment," Hamilton says. "But the fact of the matter is we didn't have the evidence. There was no direct evidence of Reagan knowing that this effort was going forward. We determined that he should have known, but he didn't."

What still bothers Hamilton about the hearings, however, is that Marine Corps Officer Oliver North (now a host on the Fox News Channel) lied to him under oath.

"He's the one that lied to me on the record," Hamilton says. "He told me we were not selling arms to Iran, and that we were not giving the proceeds to Nicaraguan rebels, and I believed him when he told me."

Ever the consensus builder, Hamilton nonetheless attempts to sympathize with North's position. "Oliver North is a gung-ho Marine. He thought he was doing what God asked him to do. He totally committed to what he did. I think the White House, whoever it was, just put him in an impossible position. I didn't agree with him, obviously. I certainly didn't approve of him lying to me. But I've never held it against him personally."

Asked if there's anyone against whom he does hold any resentment, Hamilton replies sternly, "If there were, I wouldn't tell you."

(top) Hamilton (right) with President Richard Nixon and Vice President Spiro Agnew circa 1969.

(bottom) Oliver North testifying during the Iran-Contra hearings in 1987.

(opposite page) Hamilton (right) and Dick Cheney (center) share a laugh during the Iran-Contra hearings.

Photos courtesy of Modern Political Papers, IU Libraries

FRIENDSHIP WITH DICK CHENEY

Such diplomacy has earned Hamilton trust on both sides of the aisle. One of his dearest friends, in fact, is former Vice President Dick Cheney. "Dick and I have been good friends for a good many years," he says. "He's a fine person. I would often go see Dick about problems that we had [in Congress] to see where the Republicans were and if there was any possibility of an agreement. Dick was always a very straight shooter. He never misled me. I knew he would not go running off to the cameras, and he would give me an accurate report."

'DICK [CHENEY] AND I HAVE BEEN *good friends* FOR A GOOD MANY YEARS. HE'S A FINE PERSON.'

Naturally, Cheney and Hamilton parted ways when it came to foreign policy. Hamilton opposed both of the Iraq wars launched during the respective Bush presidencies. In both instances, he says, he felt that diplomatic efforts had not been exhausted. "With regard to the first Gulf War, when George H.W. Bush was president, I had several conversations with an Iraqi diplomat I knew who was serving in New York, and then with some of our own people, which persuaded me that the diplomatic channels had not been fully explored," he says.

'EVEN PRIOR TO 9/11, I HAD *no doubt at all* THAT *President Bush* WANTED TO INVADE IRAQ. GEORGE BUSH HAD MADE UP HIS MIND.'

Hamilton adds that the Gulf War was in many ways a foregone conclusion. "There was a long buildup to that war. We took months to build up the troops in the Gulf. That was done quite skillfully by President Bush, but it was very clear to me that you could not put that many American troops in the region and just leave them there. They were going to have to go to war or come home. Coming home was not an option, because it would have meant backing down. It seemed to me that war was kind of inexorable."

Even more certain was the younger Bush's Iraq War.

THE IRAQ INVASION

"Even prior to 9/11, I had no doubt at all that President Bush wanted to invade Iraq," Hamilton says. "George Bush had made up his mind. I knew that because I read carefully what he said, I had conversations with him, and I knew his instinct on it. When 9/11 came along, it became a reason for him to go in. But he would have found a way to go after Saddam Hussein."

As vice chair of the 9/11 Commission, Hamilton determined that invasion of Afghanistan was warranted as retaliatory action. The link that Bush perceived between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein, however, was imaginary.

"There was no tie between Saddam Hussein and 9/11," he says. "[Bush] was so passionate in his belief that he had to go after Saddam

Hamilton with the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1977, shortly before the signing of the Camp David Accords.
Photo courtesy of Modern Political Papers, IU Libraries

Hussein that he wanted to believe deeply that they had weapons of mass destruction. There was no evidence of that, either. [Bush] wanted to believe deeply that [Hussein] was a threat to us, which he was not. But he just felt it in his bones."

Bush's misdirected aggression would have been better applied, Hamilton says, in responding to the 2000 terrorist attack that preceded 9/11: the bombing of the *USS Cole*. This suicide attack came just before the 2000 elections and killed 17 U.S. sailors stationed near Yemen. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the bombing, but at the time neither the exiting Clinton administration nor the newly elected Bush administration attempted to retaliate. Hamilton believes that this failure to respond encouraged Osama bin Laden to attack the U.S. on 9/11.

"We didn't do anything. We didn't retaliate in any way," Hamilton recalls. "So Osama bin Laden, I believe, drew the inference that the United States would not respond [to another attack]. That made him think that America was more vulnerable. Now, we don't know the mind of Osama bin Laden, but that would be my view. I think that because we did not respond we encouraged him to think that he could do other things."

THE IRAQ STUDY GROUP

Following his service on the 9/11 Commission, Hamilton was appointed co-chair of the Iraq Study Group along with former Secretary of State James Baker. That report "changed the debate in the country on Iraq," Hamilton recalls, driving even the Bush White House to acknowledge a need for a change in policy.

The Iraq Study Group made three principal recommendations: to increase emphasis on training Iraqi forces, to make aid to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki contingent on measurable progress, and to initiate a "diplomatic offensive" in the region that would include Iran and Syria in an effort to create stability in the Middle East. (The first two recommendations were eventually implemented to some degree, but the third has not yet been followed, Hamilton says.)

The day the report was released, Hamilton got a call from British Prime Minister Tony Blair. "He said it was the best government report he'd ever read," Hamilton says. Bush, on the other hand, "didn't like it." The White House did, however, begin to acknowledge some of the problems troops were facing. Bush also implemented the troop surge, a measure

HAMILTON'S RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE *Iraq Study Group* REPORT BECAME THE BASIS FOR *Barack Obama*'S IRAQ WAR POLICY.

the Iraq Study Group had noted as one it could support. Hamilton comments that the surge "worked militarily but not politically—it accomplished the objective of reducing the violence, but what it did not accomplish was bringing about a political reconciliation."

Hamilton's recommendations in the Iraq Study Group report became the basis for Barack Obama's Iraq War policy. The two men met frequently during Obama's presidential campaign. Hamilton recalls the moment when he knew Obama would be the Democratic nominee: "[Hillary] Clinton was expected to carry Indiana big and she did not. She just barely won," he says. "So I tell the president that Indiana put him over the top, which is pretty accurate. He acknowledges it."

Hamilton continued to meet with the president after his election, particularly as he was setting up his cabinet. Hamilton's greatest contribution to the Obama presidency, he says, is in the area of human resources. "I've furnished ten or twelve people on his staff who used to work for me."

Hamilton now serves on Obama's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and Homeland Security Advisory Council, as well as the FBI Director's Advisory Board, the Defense Secretary's National Security Study Group, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Task Force on Preventing the Entry of Weapons of Mass Effect on American Soil. Until last fall, he was also the director of Washington's Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Among the many distinguished leaders who came to the Wilson Center was Mikhail Gorbachev, the former general secretary of the Soviet Union, who visited several times at Hamilton's invitation. Hamilton describes him as "an immensely talented man and a natural politician, articulate beyond any imagining." He recalls that each time Gorbachev came to the Wilson Center, "he'd insist on shaking

Hamilton at his home in Bloomington.

hands with the cooks, like an American politician."

Scholars at the Wilson Center were able to call upon Hamilton's extensive connections, but his generosity occasionally got him into trouble. Hamilton once persuaded former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to grant an interview to a Swedish scholar at the center who was writing Kissinger's biography. "Henry said, 'Lee, I don't do those kind of interviews, but I'll do it for you,'" he recalls. Upon publication, the book turned out to be highly critical of Kissinger. "Henry calls me up and says, 'Lee, I'm never going to accept an interview on your recommendation again,'" Hamilton says. He is unperturbed by this recollection, laughing heartily before concluding, "Oh, well, these things happen."

BACK HOME IN INDIANA

Here in Bloomington, his Center on Congress (founded at the behest of former Indiana University President Myles Brand) aims to educate the public about the function of the legislature, using print and online materials to encourage civic engagement among youth and adults. His goal, he explains, is not to discuss the intricacies of committee jurisdiction, but to help citizens understand the role of Congress in a representative democracy. "I'm trying to reach the ordinary guy that has breakfast at McDonald's every morning," he says.

Hamilton and his wife Nancy moved to Bloomington at the end of last year, and so far, he says, "We find it a wonderful spot to be." The task of paring down his commitments has proved daunting, however. He's not ready to give up all his high-level activities—that restlessness is still there—but he says he's had enough of the incessant travel.

"I've spent a large part of my life chasing airplanes, and I'd be very happy if I never saw another airport in my life. I'm trying to figure out now how much travel to Washington I can tolerate," he says.

What he does miss about Washington, however, is the "camaraderie" on the Hill. He left a lot of good friends behind, he says—from Al Gore to Pat Buchanan—but he's looking forward to making more of them in his new home.

"It's definitely a new chapter for me, there's no doubt about that," he says. "We're very happy to be here in Bloomington." ✲